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Abstract

This paper was presented at the 9th congress of the International Association for the Scientific Study of Intellectual Disabilities, Gold Coast, August 1992. The author states that any examination of the vocational options available for people with intellectual disabilities must be seen in the context of international trends in employment generally, as well as the philosophical, economic and cultural contexts of the particular country. Prior to the 1970s, employment was seen as being in institutions and a day activity. But research results in the 1970s encouraged the idea of real work for real pay in community settings. However, how people with intellectual disabilities have fared in employment has fluctuated as a result of attitudinal changes and economic instability. **Keywords:** **Employment**

VOCATIONAL ISSUES

*An International Perspective of Vocational Options for People
with an Intellectual Disability:
The Promise and The Reality*

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As in the area of community living, developments in the employment for people with intellectual disabilities has been as much influenced by our value system as it has been by research findings. In 1977, when reviewing follow-up studies of the post-school adjustment of this group of people, Jackson commented that

The unduly pessimistic outlook which characterised thinking in the twenties and thirties would seem to have been replaced in the sixties and seventies by a degree of optimism that is scarcely warranted from an examination of the evidence... An examination of the relevant literature on post-school adjustment of the mentally retarded over the past two decades provides a good illustration of the way in which a myth can be created, fostered and eventually transmuted into one of the conventional wisdom of our time (pp.280-281).

Hence the title of my paper. In the light of developments in this field since the late seventies, Jackson's comments are indeed provocative. But has the promise been achieved in reality? I shall attempt to indicate where we have made some very positive gains in providing more satisfactory working environments for people with an intellectual disability, but I shall also point to areas where we must make some concentrated efforts to ensure the advances we have made are consolidated and new barriers are overcome.

The basic premise of this paper is that a study of the vocational options available to people with an intellectual disability must be grounded in the context of international trends in employment for people without disabilities. It must also be located within the philosophical, economic and cultural contexts of individual countries. Indeed, one must also be conscious of regional and district differences within countries.

Research, practices and opinions concerning employment for people with intellectual disabilities can be influenced, on the one hand, the eschatological and somewhat

pessimistic views on the imminent breakdown in society brought about by the influences of modernism recently espoused by Wolfensberger (1992) while, on the other end of the spectrum, by behavioural scientists such as Tizard, Whelan Gold, Bellamy, Horner, Wehman, Kiernan, Rusch and Schalock, some of whom have portrayed in a spirit of at times, exaggerated optimism, the view that no challenge in this area is invincible.

Historically, employment for people with an intellectual disability was seen as a day activity for people who were either in institutional settings or in the care of families who needed a respite from the tedium of twenty-four hour care. In several countries vocational or day activity centres were built and supported by voluntary parent groups. Charitable organisations also entered the field, establishing networks of employment facilities that ultimately attracted government financial support.

It is interesting that there was a conjunction of philosophies and research in this area in the early 1970s. Research suggested that even the most severely disabled person could be trained to perform complex vocational tasks. These results, together with a paradigmatic shift in community attitudes that emphasise real work for real pay in community settings, have led to a growth of employment options that are community-based.

Research Results To Date

Research in employment has encompassed a number of major themes that I shall address briefly. In tracing the chronology of this research I propose that studies could be loosely grouped into three categories - (a) predictive studies, (b) studies related to instructional technology, and (c) studies that have explored the work environment, business and market conditions.

Predictive studies

One of the problems concerning earlier research highlighted by Cobb and Epir (1966) and Wolfensberger (1967) was the difficulty of predicting adult success in the population of people with an intellectual disability. Wolfensberger's criticisms of this early research are possibly still relevant today:

- poor research design
- lack of cross-validation of findings
- lack of confirmation of even the most tenuous results across different studies
- almost exclusive emphasis upon variables associated with the disabled person to the neglect of variables inherent in the training or placement process or in work situations
- the assumption of homogeneity in the criteria of success among a wide range of intellectually handicapped persons and working conditions
- lack of research to improve assessment, rehabilitation, training and resettlement procedures in disability/vocational rehabilitation

Cobb's seminal study in this period, "The Forecast of Fulfilment" (1972) revealed that a high proportion of adult intellectually handicapped persons did achieve satisfactory

adjustments, by whatever criteria are employed. This finding was especially true, claimed Cobb, for those at the mild level, but it was also held to be true for many at the moderate and severe levels of disability.

These findings are interesting, especially as there was little evidence to support the utility of special intervention programs in the school system for advancing the vocational adjustment of these people in their post school life.

The buoyant labour market in post-war industrialised economics also facilitated the employment of many people with mild disabilities without too much prior intervention. Of course, not all studies have been as sanguine: e.g. Richardson's (1988) longitudinal work in Scotland has revealed a more depressing picture of the adult adjustment of a large group of intellectually disabled people.

Studies in the 1970s did suggest, however, that many of these people "made it" without very much special intervention - or maybe in spite of it! What became evident, however, was that a significant number of this population was destined to spend their adult life in segregated sheltered employment or day activity centres.

As Cobb (1972) remarked, this period did not see the emergence of a coherent theoretical base upon which to determine satisfactory community or vocational adjustment, and nor were the predictive studies linked to a coherent theory of human development and learning.

The Interventionist phase

This phase saw a dramatic burgeoning of studies on the effectiveness of instructional strategies to increase the employability of intellectually disabled people, especially those with moderate and severe levels of disability. This period was influenced by the significant impact applied behaviour analysis approaches to the study of human learning was having in the special education arena. Here the early work of Tizard, Gold and Bellamy is noteworthy.

This phase also coincided with the emerging philosophies of normalisation and precepts such as community integration and least restrictive alternative that ultimately were embodied in disability legislation in many countries. Several countries also adopted social justice policies for people with disabilities that led to mandated quota systems for their employment. While this approach has been successful in a small number of countries, the main beneficiaries have been people with physical or sensory impairments.

This period was also marked in some countries by the almost religiously held view that work was the sole means by which people with an intellectual handicap could access a satisfactory adult life adjustment. In my view, in this phase researchers had still not come to grips with a satisfactory and comprehensive model of community adjustment, a weakness noted in the earlier period. Insofar as disabled people are concerned, we may have discovered the Weberian concept of the Protestant Work Ethic a little too late. Indeed, as I observed in my introduction, we must rapidly

explore employment issues for people with disabilities in the context of labour market trends for the general population.

Nevertheless, this second phase has produced some very important results from a research perspective. One of the most noteworthy has been the change of emphasis in behavioural learning theory from consequences (i.e. reinforcers and punishers) as a means of behaviour change to a closer attention to antecedent conditions. This has had the effect of producing instructional strategies that have resulted in a more effective acquisition of skills and a more durable maintenance of learned behaviours. To some extent the instructional technology based on this approach has effected generalisation of these behaviours.

It is noteworthy that much of the research in the area of generalisation has been located within employment and community living programs.

In addition to advances in applied behaviour analysis there have also been some useful developments in cognitive psychology, particularly in the area of strategy training and problem solving where the population studied has mainly been in the mild range of intellectual disability and, more recently, those identified as learning disabled.

The ecological phase

While obviously the second phase of studies did encompass vocational aspects outside the individual, such as employer receptivity to intellectually disabled people, the third or ecological phase has produced a much richer array of studies that are beginning to approach the employment question from a sounder theoretical basis.

Current studies have better reflected the multidimensional nature of what constitutes satisfactory adult adjustment for people with an intellectual disability. There has been a heavy emphasis in this phase upon the establishment of competitive and supported employment programs within the open workforce. Major studies have explored the outputs of these programs in a number of countries, including cost benefit analyses and the identification of "best" practices usually via indices such as level of wages and degrees of community integration. Other studies have broadened into the effects employment programs have had on the social and interpersonal behaviours of the intellectually handicapped person.

One of the most recent developments has been the exploration of how natural supports might assist in the effective maintenance of an employee in a competitive employment setting.

Two important research developments that have the potential to locate the employment issue in a broader theoretical context are transition from school to work and adult living programs, and the analysis of quality of life. One advantage accruing from these two broad streams of research is the linking of special education and post-school options in a coherent framework that is helping to establish a pattern of research throughout the life span of a person with a disability.

The analysis of the impact various programs have upon a person's quality of life can be used both as process and product indices of the utility of the programs. The examination of the meaning of quality of life for people with disability, and an intellectual disability in particular, provides a rich dimension for both epistemological and experimental advances in our study of intellectual disability.

Some of the major findings to emerge in this phase have been:

- People with all levels of intellectual disability can work in either competitive or supportive jobs in the community and can earn wages substantially higher than those generally paid in sheltered workshops (with the exception of countries where income supplementation is paid).
- Supported employment programs, especially in the USA, are employing a high proportion of people with a mild level of intellectual disability, despite these programs being initially targeted for people with higher support needs.
- Supported employment programs are proving to be cost effective in terms of benefits to the employee and to the funding agencies, e.g. taxpayer.
- Despite explicit government policies in several countries to encourage sheltered workshops to transform their programs into community based activities, there has been only a small movement of their employees into the general workforce. For instance, in the USA it has been estimated about ten per cent of people with a developmental disability are in community-based employment. In Australia, as at the end of 1991, only about four per cent of sheltered employment agencies have transferred to approved service types.
- Difficulties being experienced in community-based programs have been linked to the paucity of training available for professionals working in the programs. The high turnover in staff presents an ongoing challenge to service providers.
- People with disabilities in competitive and supported employment programs, despite their physical Integration, are in many cases not accepted socially. A major research theme has been the exploration of strategies to assist the development of social and interpersonal skills of people employed in community settings.
- Researchers are commencing to address the processes that lead to the successful vocational adjustment of people with intellectual disabilities, rather than concentrating solely upon an evaluation of narrowly defined outputs. An examination of marketing strategies to facilitate successful job matches is one example.
- Many of the jobs into which people with intellectual disabilities are being placed are low-level positions with little opportunity for advancement.
- As the supported employment movement has gained popularity there is competition for places, and hence funding, from other disability groups.

Historically this parallels the situation in Europe where in a number of countries people with intellectual disabilities have not fared well in accessing sheltered employment facilities.

Future Research & Policy

Before addressing the future research agenda in employment, however, I wish to draw your attention to a number of issues within which this research and policy development must be located.

Paradox of economic rationality and social justice

Traditionally, programs for people with disabilities in most countries have been a responsibility of government social welfare agencies. However, in the field of community-based employment, one is forced to explore labour markets, economic theory, and business management; areas not normally associated with welfare issues. In this context, Paul Comes of the Rehabilitation Studies Unit of the University of Edinburgh maintains that as long as we retain a commitment to the social and economic integration of people with disabilities, any consideration of the future of work must pay attention to their particular needs and circumstances. Cornes' (1984) thesis is that, as labour markets are in transition, resulting from significant structural changes in the economies of the industrialised countries, marginal groups in society are going to be further disadvantaged.

Not all of Cornes' predictions are pessimistic. For instance, as advances in technology are leading to an increase in home-based employment for many people, Cornes has suggested that this development may be of importance to people with mobility handicaps.

Societal and economic changes

Alvin Tofler's predictions in "Future Shock" (1970) and "The Third Wave" (1980) are appearing to have some legitimacy as we witness social and economic upheavals in societies across the world. Countries where social and economic structures have been built around the principle of continued economic growth are entering a period where permanent structural unemployment is becoming a stark reality, especially for young people and middle-aged males. In some countries the phenomenon of the "middle class poor" is emerging, resulting in lower level jobs being sought by people who would normally be employed in middle or top management positions.

Demographic trends resulting in an ageing population, coupled with early retirement, are also challenging the place of work in one's life that was typical in the industrial era. There are also signs of the middle class shrinking and a consequent increase in numbers of the working poor.

The trend in unemployment evidenced in figures in the OECD member countries provide an unpalatable picture for those attempting to place people with marginal skills in a highly competitive workforce.

Unemployment rates as a per cent of the total labour force for OECD countries reveal a fairly pessimistic trend for the period 1981-1990 (see Fig. 1). The European member countries have rates varying between 7 and 10 per cent. While the OECD average rates have ranged between 6 and 9 per cent, these figures have been made to appear more optimistic by the relatively low rates of unemployed in Japan for this period. Recent OECD reports confirm the chronic sluggishness of the economies of many of the industrialised countries.

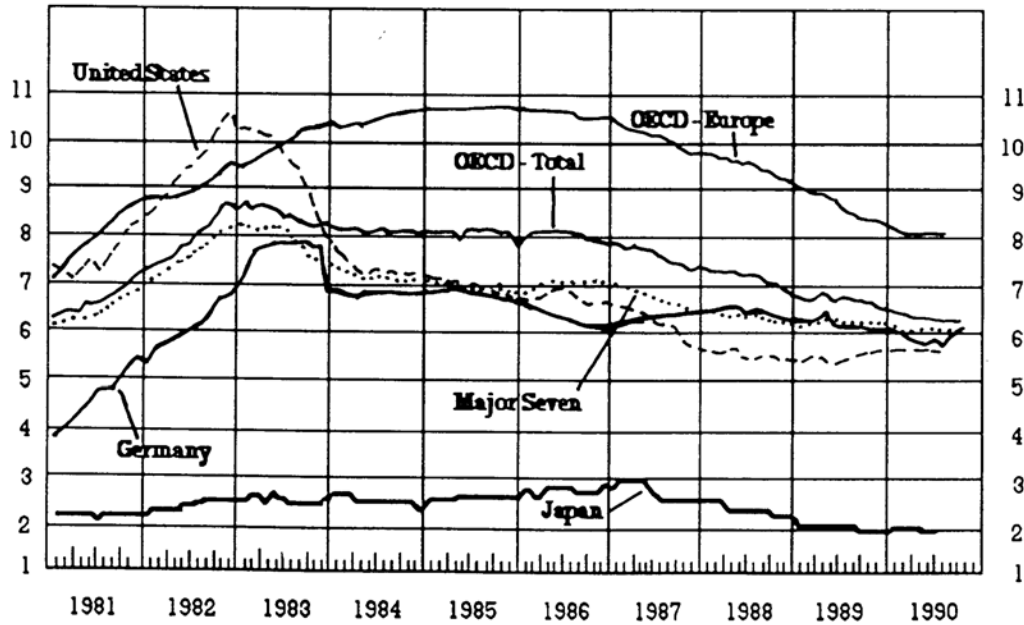
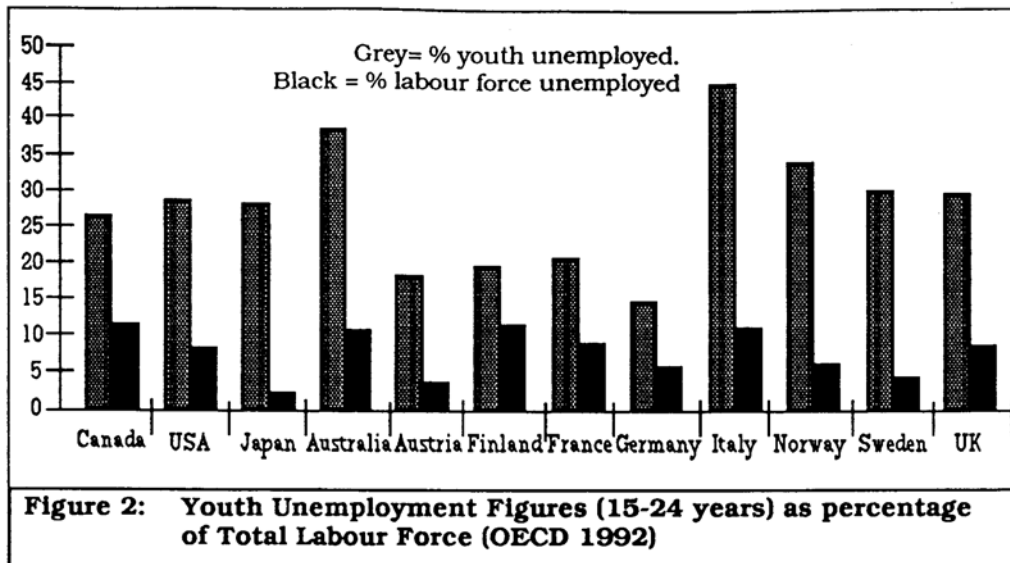


Figure 1: Standardised unemployment rates - per cent of total labour force seasonally adjusted (OECD 1990)

The position for youth unemployed is equally depressing. The first quarter of 1992 figures for a number of OECD member countries reveal that youth (aged 15-24 years) unemployed as a percentage of the total labour force ranges from 18.6 per cent in Austria to 45.6 per cent in Italy (Figure 2). Even in countries such as Japan, Sweden, Austria and Germany, where the overall percentage of unemployment is relatively low, the percentages of unemployed youth is still quite high in comparison (Table 1).



Tofler's (1980) contention is that we are moving back to a prosumer society where the divisions between production and consumers are being blurred as people and communities become more self-reliant. If, in fact, we are moving to a more diverse and participatory society, there is a potential for us to anticipate areas where meaningful work activities for people with intellectual disabilities might be available. There is a danger that, if we are continually chasing the tail of social revolutions, this population will always be at the margin when trying to access meaningful life activities.

Despite the trend in many countries to prolong years of schooling for young people, Tofler predicts that education will change:

More learning will occur outside, rather than inside, the classroom. Despite the pressure from the unions, the years of compulsory schooling will grow shorter, not longer. Instead of rigid age segregation, young and old will mingle. Education will become more interspersed and interwoven with work, and more spread over a lifetime (1980. p.304).

Country	% Youth Unemployed			% Labour Force Unemployed
	M	F	T	
Canada	26.6	26.4	26.5	10.6
USA	29.2	28.8	29.0	7.1
Japan	27.0	30.3	28.4	2.0
Australia	38.2	45.7	41.2	10.3
Austria	18.3	18.4	18.6	3.5*
Finland	19.4	21.0	20.0	11.3
France	20.1	22.4	21.3	9.3*
Germany	15.0	14.0	14.5	5.5
Italy	48.0	51.0	45.6	10.8
Norway	31.0	37.5	33.3	5.8
Sweden	30.8	29.0	30.1	3.8
UK	27.5	37.0	29.8	9.1*

*1991 figures

Table 1: Youth Unemployment Figures (15-24 years) as percentages of total labour force (OECD 1992)

Lessons from Third World countries

We should reverse the practice of exporting our Western industrialised-based ideas and programs to developing countries, for those countries often produce much simpler solutions to social problems. For instance, Aldred Neufeldt (1990) has, in this context, pointed out that:

- simple services lead to simple solutions
- micro economic strategies seem more effective than macro
- the true focal point should be the home and family of the disabled person

Some of the practices in meaningful job creation in the South Pacific societies including Fiji, Vanuatu and the Solomon's, could be emulated in the so-called developed countries. An interesting scheme is reported from Malaysia where a shopping complex, conducted by people with a variety of disabilities including intellectual impairments, is flourishing, giving a positive image for these people in the general community.

Future research and policy issues

Following are a number of issues that require urgent investigation by the research community:

- there is a need to establish key longitudinal studies to determine the long-term adjustment of people who have accessed community-based employment programs. Do all work options give equal outcomes and under what conditions?
- a more integrated approach to policy development based on sound theoretical principles should be pursued. In my own country policy has been developed on the false premise that government and bureaucracy is the major change agent in effecting innovative service delivery. The deleterious effects of the "political correctness" mentality and the over - emphasis upon professionalism need to be balanced by an exploration of how communities may be empowered to develop their own solutions.
- a more coherent approach to technical assistance to assist agencies, communities, employers and business in anticipating and accommodating rapidly changing economies and social systems is required.
- the changing role of sheltered employment facilities should be explored. As well as a place of work they have often been the only currently available opportunity for socialisation, education and recreation. A person with an Intellectual disability working in open employment will not necessarily have access to these additional activities that may be valued more highly than the job.
- a broader range of post-school options for people with severe and multiple disabilities should be available, including but not necessarily exclusive work options.
- a thorough analysis needs to be made of individualised funding and brokerage strategies, in addition to ways of managing services at a local level, while maintaining national/state policy initiatives.
- evaluation and quality assurance procedures need to be established in the context of innovative employment strategies. A recent Australian study has revealed that a number of the newer community-based programs are achieving no better outcomes than the traditional sheltered facilities.
- as the processes of community adjustment are studied research should focus upon specific issues that may be presenting barriers. These may be in both the areas of the skills/competencies of the individual and in environmental factors. We still have some way to go in strategy, choice-making and problem-solving skills, which are required in jobs where the intellectual demands are constantly changing, e.g. in many of the service industries.
- cost-benefit analyses, while seemingly essential for governments called upon to fund employment programs, must be extended to include variables that are difficult to assess in monetary terms. Quantitative analyses such as data envelopment procedures, combined with qualitative methodologies, are a way forward.

- the emerging concept of natural support requires thorough examination lest it be perceived solely as a cost cutting device. Nevertheless, the concept offers a promising facilitator of community support networking that fits in with emerging societal changes. Obviously strategies must be found to utilise generic supports, albeit with specialist supervision, as the capacity of systems to meet the costs of ongoing support needs is being questioned.
- an examination of income producing strategies other than wage employment may be a useful line of research to follow. An international study being conducted by the Income Generation Strategies Project based at the University of Calgary is currently underway that will be a significant cross-cultural contribution to our field.
- future studies should include people with intellectual disabilities in the various stages of research planning. This process can be facilitated by a greater use of qualitative research methods.

Conclusion

Just as the presence of children with disabilities in the mainstream of education challenges us to re-examine the role and goals of education the emerging phenomenon of community-based employment for people with intellectual disabilities is a challenge for policy development in the labour market sphere. If this group of people is to obtain a legitimate, rather than marginal place in future labour markets, however defined, the field must take a more rigorous and proactive approach.

Notwithstanding the fact that policy is seldom directly based on research findings, international organisations such as IASSID have a responsibility to analyse and disseminate research findings that may assist in the adaptation and refinement of policies. These findings, however, must be analysed in the context of the culture, economy and value systems of the countries where the research is conducted.

Despite the difficulties currently being experienced and those that appear to be almost insurmountable in the future, we can confidently say that large numbers of people with intellectual disabilities across the world are experiencing a better quality of life as a result of innovative employment practices. Our challenge is to maintain the momentum and to extend the number and range of programs and practices to meet unmet needs and adapt to future societal changes.

References are available on request. *